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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MICHEL AOUNS SAYS, "I DON'T WANT TO BE
MISUNDERSTOOD"

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) FPM leader and MP General Michel Aoun offered a series of indirect answers, vague pronouncements and prophesies of continuing and even-bigger challenges to the current government, in the course of meeting with visiting Senators Dodd and Kerry. Aoun blamed the Siniora regime for marginalization of Christians and abuses of power. He proposed no solutions, but advocated a cabinet that included more representatives from the opposition. End summary.

12. (SBU) Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun received CODEL Dodd/Kerry at his home in Beirut on December 18. He said that he wanted to clarify misconceptions about him and his position, which are fostered by the press in the U.S. and run counter to his and the FPM's genuine affinity for the United States. He said that, despite his "little disagreements" with the Ambassador, he is still friendly to the U.S. and considers that "shared values" between the two countries are important. Aoun's conversation was made up mostly of platitudes and indirect replies to questions. He focused not on substantive issues, but instead he tried to explain his appeal to Christians as a non-corrupt nationalist whose engagement with Hizballah was reassuring to people who are otherwise worried about the cost of excluding Hizballah from mainstream Lebanese politics.

ABUSE BY THE GOVERNMENT RESULTS IN FAILURE -----

13. (SBU) Aoun attributed the current crisis in the GOL to "abuses" by the government, beginning with the abuses of President Lahoud. The Cabinet and the President were each attempting to act independently of one another, with the President ceasing to cooperate with the Cabinet, and the Cabinet not respecting the constitution. For Aoun, the government and particularly the Cabinet is a failure on all counts: an economic failure in the absence of any reform; a political failure in the absence of a unity government; and a security failure marked by too many assassinations. Now is time for new elections, to construct a government that will rest on solid constitutional grounds.

THE GOVERNMENT IS THE PROBLEM -----

14. (SBU) Aoun explained why he believes that the government is currently unconstitutional. He cited two conditions for legitimacy: a proper number of ministers in the Cabinet, and a proper distribution of ministries among the confessions.

When challenged by Senator Kerry on why the current set-up is unconstitutional, Aoun changed the subject to the marginalization of Christians, saying, "I always spoke against that" for more than eighteen months. "Our consensual democracy needs power sharing. The government has to abide by democratic conditions." He scorned as another government mistake the "internationalizing or Arabizing" of Lebanon,s problems, saying that Lebanon,s political crisis &is not a Syrian/Iranian problem."

THE FPM AND HIZBALLAH
WILL KEEP THIS UP

15. (SBU) Hizballah and the Shia are rightfully a part of the government, said Aoun. Rather than fighting, the solution should be based on resolving the status of Hizballah,s weapons. Aoun said he opposed anything that involves Iran in the internal affairs of Lebanon, but then sidestepped an effort to draw him out on his February 2006 pact with Hizballah. He admitted to being a candidate for the presidency. In his capacity as a voice of the opposition, he added that if the crisis is not settled, "we will keep it (the downtown demonstrations and sit-ins) like this until the New Year" and then it will be "huge." He described the sit-ins as an attempt not to bring down the government, but to achieve democracy.

NO DIRECT ANSWERS

16. (SBU) On the question of the Special Tribunal, Aoun said that if Cabinet approval of the Tribunal reaches the Parliament, then he will vote for it. He said the problem

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with the Tribunal is in the text of the documents; they must conform with the constitution. "Discussion of the documents should take place between Cabinet ministers and Parliamentary deputies." The proposed "blocking third" that the opposition seeks in Cabinet composition is not a problem, Aoun said, because the opposition would never use its ability to block proposed legislation on domestic issues. It would consider blocking only "important issues" like the Special Tribunal or foreign policy questions.

17. (SBU) Aoun declined to identify whom he thought might have killed former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, on the ground that he (Aoun) is a "responsible" person. He suggested that the crime could have been a hired job, the act of Muslim extremists, or possibly Syria. He thought that the Lebanese Armed Forces are doing well, although they may need more training to act effectively in the south. He was non-committal about the UNSCRs 1559 and 1701, saying that they should be "respected" in the course of discussions in the national dialogue.

AND ON SYRIA . . .

18. (SBU) The CODEL noted that they would be traveling to Syria and asked Aoun what message the Senators should take to President Bashar al-Asad. Aoun replied that the Syrian President should be asked to "leave Lebanon alone," although not at the expense of good and friendly relations between Syria and Lebanon. Aoun deflected a question on how much money the Syrians took out of Lebanon during the Syrian occupation, recommending a forensic investigation of Syria,s Lebanese collaborators, implicating unspecified members of the present government.

19. (SBU) Codel Dodd has cleared this cable.
MURRAY